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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GUAYAQUIL 000533

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: GUAYAQUIL PROTESTS COME UP SHORT

REF: A) QUITO 852 B) GUAYAQUIL 132

1. Summary: Guayaquil joined the ranks of protesting Ecuadorian cities when on April 18 approximately 25,000 residents turned out for mayor Jaime Nebot's (Social Christian Party - PSC) anti-government/pro-Guayaquil march, and a much smaller number joined presidential cousin Renan Borbua and Guayas governor Efren Rocas in a rally to support president Gutierrez. Lacking the fervor of Quito protests (Reftel A), both demonstrations took on a festive rather than confrontational atmosphere, with no major incidents reported and no anti-US sentiment displayed. Overall, the afternoon's events were short-lived and received limited media coverage, contrasting greatly with the large, extended protests that have plagued the capital for the past week. End summary.

OPPOSITION MARCH PEACEFUL AND UNEVENTFUL

2. Following days of ambiguity surrounding Guayaquil mayor and opposition party member Jaime Nebot's planned response to the country's political unrest, on Saturday April 16 he declared he would lead a motorized caravan through the city streets on April 18. Initially, the purpose of the mobilization was to demand the lifting of the state of emergency and for a resolution to Gutierrez' decree dissolving the Supreme Court (Ref A). However, after both issues were resolved prior to his protest, Nebot changed the focus to support the creation of a new, non-political Supreme Court and a general petition to the central government to comply with its obligations to the city of Guayaquil (Ref B).

3. Though fewer in number, participants represented a greater cross-section of society than in Nebot's January "Marcha Blanca," where the elite of Guayaquil were much in evidence. (Reftel B) The lack of a clearly defined goal and message from the protest's leader resulted in a more subdued crowd that looked more to be participating in a civic parade than in a demonstration against the government. Nebot walked the route, accompanied by Guayas prefect Nicolas Lapentti, and upon reaching the riverfront destination, offered a few words to congregated press, but refused calls from the crowd to give a speech.

4. Besides Lapentti, few luminaries joined in Nebot's opposition march. A few of the lesser-known chamber of production heads participated, but the presidents of the large and influential chambers of industry and commerce did not. Despite his presence in Guayaquil, former president, current congressman, and PSC leader Leon Febres Cordero avoided the protest, telling the press he did not agree with Nebot's handling of the march, and expressing his desire for a more aggressive anti-Gutierrez position from Guayaquil.

PRO GOVERNMENT CAMP HAS LITTLE IMPACT

5. Soon after Nebot called for a mobilization in Guayaquil and neighboring cities, leaders of the president's political party (Sociedad Patriotica - SP) revealed that they would hold a rally to support the administration. This was followed by reports that Bucaram's PRE party would organize a counter march to Nebot's assembly, to start and end in the same points as the mayor's. The PRE was able to rally some support in its January counter march to Nebot's "Marcha Blanca," but in the end did not produce on April 18.

6. The rally organized by the SP gathered several thousand followers, though overall it was unable to demonstrate a large outpouring of support for the president. Led by former congressman Renan Borbua, who in addition to being a first cousin of Gutierrez is the SP party director for the Guayas province, the march was intended to demonstrate the president's backing outside of Quito. With Guayas governor Efren Rocas by his side, Borbua intended to make his way across the city to the government offices downtown. However, police blocked their route to prevent the crowd from crossing Nebot's march. Media coverage focused on Nebot's march, leaving the SP with very little in terms of achieving their goal.

NON-POLITICAL ORGANIZERS FAIL TO DELIVER

17. Press reports indicated that as many as five separate marches were scheduled to take place in Guayaquil on April 18. For the anti-government camp, in addition to the widely publicized motorized caravan headed by the mayor, the left-leaning and at times violent national teacher and university student unions were to have organized groups to take to the streets. These two groups were politically active in the 1980s and 1990s, but have been largely dormant in the past few years. Thus, there was some anticipation that the current political situation would be the catalyst to bring them out. However, the teacher union's calls for protest amounted to nothing, and the university student organization turned out only 50 students.

COMMENT

18. The incessant honking of horns made the April 18 protest in Guayaquil noisier than its predecessor in January, but it lacked the same level of energy in every other sense. Rather than being born out of a strong consensus for the need to effect change, the demonstrations seemed more to be about not wanting to be left out of the fray. Nebot has shown himself to be the more moderate mayor, avoiding the bombast of his Quito counterpart. Leading this protest he seemed more restrained than usual and it did not appear as if his heart was in the Guayaquil demonstration. Whether that was because of Febres Cordero's criticisms of his choice of action, the lack of a cause resonant with Guayaquilenos, or his preference to maintain a measured stance, the result was that his organized protest appeared half-hearted, undermining its likely effect on the central government. End comment.

HERBERT